

How to Write an Ethical Will: A Love Letter to the Future

Susan R. Dolan, Huffington Post, posted 2/17/2015

An ethical will is used to pass on personal values, beliefs, blessings, and advice to future generations. It is a way to tell stories and share your memories.

An ethical will is not a legal document; it is distinct from legal documents like a last will and testament or a living will. The practice of leaving an ethical will is an ancient tradition referenced in the Bible and found in many cultures.

Whether you have years left to live or are facing death, you too can write a love letter to future generations. Writing skill, spelling, and penmanship don't matter. You can scribble on a grocery bag, compose an email, record your thoughts, or sit in front of a video camera and interview yourself. What matters is content--your reflections of who you were and who you became. What were the events that shaped you? What are your priorities? Your guiding principles? What mistakes did you make; what did you learn from them? What essential truths have you learned that you can pass on to future generations?

If you hope to be remembered for who you really are, disclose that person. Don't assume others know your inner self and the challenges you met and overcame. Offer blessings, advice, insights, and bits of family history that might otherwise be lost forever.

You might speak of what is good and admirable in each of your loved ones and of the gratitude you feel that each is in your life. Even those who are closely bonded rarely express such feelings. In writing from the heart, you will discover more of who you are and what your true legacy is; you will better come to understand how you have fulfilled your purpose and what you hope to be remembered for. Whether your ethical will is limited to a few scribbled lines, several pages, or expanded into a book, there is great satisfaction in completing your gift and ensuring its safe passage to the next generation.

Ethical wills can be written and revealed at any time. Some parents and grandparents want to share this information while they are still alive and can engage in conversations about the past. Ethical wills can also be used to explain why certain decisions were made in a last will and testament or to tie the loose ends of a life together for oneself and others. They may be written and rewritten, read aloud, or put aside to be read at a special family gathering, funeral, or other rite of passage like a confirmation or a bar/bat mitzvah.

"I'd like to do all that, but it's too late," sighed an elderly woman who had lived an exciting life as a missionary in China when I suggested she write an ethical will. If you feel too ill, too weak, can no longer write legibly, can't organize your thoughts, or don't know how to use a computer, enlist someone to be your scribe or recorder. Start talking, if only for a few

minutes at a time. Talk it out over a period of a few days, weeks, or even months. Hospice volunteers relish the opportunity to help facilitate such a life review. (To learn more about hospice, visit the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization website at www.nhpco.org.)

If you struggle to come up with words of your own, borrow from poets, musicians, playwrights, biographers, saints, or my mom.

Below is an excerpt from my mother's ethical will.

"Children tend to think of their parents and grandparents as people who exist for and revolve solely around them. Yet adults live other lives, often unknown to their children. My own parents were loving and generous to me, but other than a few brief stories, I realize that I know little of their childhood, their inner lives, their dreams and plans, what they hoped to achieve, and what they believed they did accomplish.

How I would cherish a letter from my parents or my grandparents telling me about their youthful dreams and hopes, their triumphs and their failures. How did my immigrant grandparents feel when they left their childhood homes forever? Who were my parents before they became my parents? Once they were all young, full of life, eager to embrace the freedoms and promises of a still-new land. All that history is lost forever.

That's when I realized that something was missing in my will. I needed to say more, write something that went beyond that cold, dry, legal jargon, something more than the distribution of my worldly goods. I wanted to leave a written statement, a link to those who had gone on before me and to the generations that will come after me. I wanted my children and my grandchildren to know of my journey, who I was, what I thought and believed. Most of all, I wanted my family to know how much I loved them."

Thanks, Mom.

Link: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-r-dolan/how-to-write-an-ethical-will-a-love-letter-to-future-generations_b_6684454.html